DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 472 890 IR 058 595

AUTHOR	Gaudet, Franceen; Savard, Nicolas
TITLE	Virtual Reference Canada (VRC): A Canadian Service in a Multicultural Environment.
PUB DATE	2002-08-00
NOTE	13p.; In: Libraries for Life: Democracy, Diversity, Delivery. IFLA Council and General Conference: Conference Programme and Proceedings (68th, Glasgow, Scotland, August 18-24, 2002); see IR 058 549.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.ifla.org.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Foreign Countries; Information Sources; Library Role; Library Services; *National Libraries; Online Systems; *Reference Services; World Wide Web
IDENTIFIERS	Canada; *Digital Collections; *Digital Information Services

ABSTRACT

Virtual Reference Canada (VRC) is a digital reference service using World Wide Web technology. It was initiated by the National Library of Canada (NLC) in spring 2001 and went into test mode at the start of 2002. It draws on the contribution of a wide range of Canadian libraries and allied institutions. The development of VRC owes a great deal to the pioneering work undertaken by the Library of Congress and its Collaborative Digital Reference Service (CDRS). This paper defines VRC, describes the specific characteristics of the Canadian environment in which it is developing, looks at VRC as a reference service within Canada's multicultural environment and, finally, discusses the role of the National Library of Canada in its development. (AEF)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 472 890

68th IFLA Council and General Conference August 18-24, 2002

Code Number: 004-128-E
Division Number: V
Professional Group: Reference Work
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 128
Simultaneous Interpretation: Yes

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S. Koopman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

Virtual Reference Canada (VRC): A C· .adian service in a multicultural environment.

Franceen Gaudet
Senior Project Officer
Virtual Reference Canada
Government On-Line Task Force
National Library of Canada
Ottawa, Canada

Nicolas Savard's
Reference Librarian
National Library of Canada
National Library of Canada
Ottawa, Canada

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

1- Introduction

Virtual Reference Canada (VRC) is a digital reference service using World Wide Web technology. It was initiated by the National Library of Canada (NLC) in spring 2001 and went into test mode at the start of 2002. It draws on the contribution of a wide range of Canadian libraries and allied institutions. The development of VRC owes a great deal to the pioneering work undertaken by the *Library of Congress* and its Collaborative Digital Reference Service (CDRS). We would like to highlight their contribution and extend our thanks to them. We

IR058595

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

would also like to recognize the significant funding support which we have received from both the Department of Canada Heritage and the Depository Services Program of Communication Canada.

The National Library of Canada played an active role in the development of CDRS from the service's beginnings in 1999. We are also a member of the Advisory Board of the QuestionPoint service, which was formerly CDRS. The *Reference and Information Services* of the National Library of Canada responds to questions referred from OCLC's (Online Computer Library Center) QuestionPoint service that relate to Canadian themes, and submits some questions outside its fields of specialization. OCLC has shared with the NLC the components and structure of the database of member profiles. As well, the National Library of Canada is exchanging information on VRC and on virtual reference services with, among others, the National Library of Australia and the National Library Board of Singapore.

In this paper, we are going to define Virtual Reference Canada, describe the specific characteristics of the Canadian environment in which it is developing, look at VRC as a reference service within Canada's multicultural environment and, finally, we are going to discuss the role of the National Library of Canada in its development.

2- VRC: What is it?

Establishing VRC within a specific institution requires few technical resources. In fact, it is a free service, calling for a computer, a telephone line, an e-mail address and access to the World Wide Web. VRC and the member institutions will communicate through an exchange of e-mails which inform an institution that its collaboration is requested, and through access to the special software resident at the NLC.

We will focus on three key concepts in discussing VRC: 1) the automated process; 2) collaboration between members; 3) the network of libraries and associated institutions.

- An automated process

The backbone of VRC consists of three components: software directing reference requests; member profiles in which participating institutions enter certain characteristics such as the subjects covered by their collections, the scope of this coverage, their hours of service, their language capabilities; and finally the reference questions themselves, which are also coded so that they can be routed automatically to the member institution best equipped to answer them.

Ultimately, a database of questions and answers handled by Virtual Reference Canada will be established. We anticipate that VRC members, like all end users, will be able, as well, to consult a variety of databases of Canadian questions and answers linked to VRC to obtain answers to their simple and factual questions. Our plans also include the development of automated links to interlibrary loans and cataloguing.

- The VRC service focuses on collaboration

The strength of VRC rests in collaboration among its members. Since libraries are having difficulties in acquiring everything relevant to the achievement of their mandates and client expectations are making reference transactions increasingly demanding, the library world needs to invent methods to remain relevant in a virtual world. Through collaboration, libraries can better serve their clients.

Degrees of collaboration already exist in the fields of cataloguing, interlibrary loans and reference service delivery. Canadian products, put out by the National Library of Canada, such as the Amicus Web catalogue, the interlibrary loan service, as well as manuals like *Interlibrary Loan Policies in Canada*, are examples of this. This collaboration already occurs internationally: for example, the implementation of the *MARC21* format and the work on *Dublin Core*.

Therefore, it seems to us that the next step is to pursue collaboration in the development of reference services. Examples of collaboration in this field in Canada include : the *Ask A Question*[1] service which involves postsecondary institutions in Alberta and very recently public libraries as well, and the Saskatchewan public libraries network[2].

- The importance of networks

We have all established networks of professional contacts. At the international level, we are forging connections by participating in conferences such as this one. In our respective countries, we are members of associations of librarians and documentalists. By communicating with colleagues in the same city and region, we have the means to allow us to do our work more effectively. VRC is another way to make contact with and stay in touch with our colleagues; it allows for participation in a cross-Canada network and opens the door to international collaboration.

VRC also intends to encourage the establishment and maintenance of links between libraries within the same region, thus fostering regional institutions. It seeks to showcase the work of these institutions in delivering service to their local residents. One of the goals of VRC is to highlight the contribution that small public libraries make to the cultural wealth and vitality of their regions.

3- VRC: A Canadian service

- Bilingual interface and multilingual service

Canada is an officially bilingual country. This official bilingualism requires institutions of the federal government to provide services in these two languages. VRC has been designed as a totally bilingual service. The interface will be available, as a choice, in either English or French. VRC is also intended to be a service capable of answering questions in languages other than English or French. Participating institutions record their linguistic characteristics in their member profiles. This includes the languages spoken by their employees and the languages of their collections as well.

- *Importance of copyright*

Respect for copyright is fundamental in Canadian libraries. Within the Canadian legal context, we have to consider copyright issues when dealing with a reference question. Both questions and answers can be intellectual property. Therefore, institutions involved in a reference transaction must do everything in their power to protect this intellectual property.

This has a significant impact on the way VRC operates, both in regard to the technical characteristics of the software and in regard to the agreements that participating institutions will be signing with VRC. All this is somewhat simple in a strictly Canadian environment, but is much more complex when a reference transaction crosses national borders.

- *Confidentiality issues*

Along with these Canadian copyright implications, we have also had to take into consideration all the issues related to protection of privacy, considering the laws of the federal, provincial and territorial governments. No component of the service should make it possible to identify the person submitting the reference question. This is even more important if this person is a minor. VRC cannot request personal information and must ensure protection of the identity of the person asking the question.

- *Participating institutions*

Participation in VRC is open to all Canadian reference service providers. This, therefore, will lead to the participation by public, university, special and government libraries, museums, archival centres and other information centres. The topics currently covered by members of VRC cover all aspects of Canadian society: human and social sciences, literature, pure and applied sciences, health, agriculture, government information, law, etc. VRC's management team is constantly on the lookout for new members. This ongoing recruitment will allow us to fill in the gaps, which may exist in the VRC service's thematic coverage.
The strength of VRC is the dynamism of its members. Each participating institution has characteristics, which make it unique, and it is the union of these members that creates VRC. The effect of this increased communication between various types of institutions is to improve the working methods of each and all of them as they share their various experiences.

- *Forging links between Canadian collections*

The scope and specific character of Canadian collections, the excellence of the service standards, and the expertise of the employees are guarantees of success. VRC enables links to be forged between these collections, fosters the sharing of resources and facilitates the dissemination of a specifically Canadian body of knowledge.

For several years Canadian libraries have faced constant reductions in their operation, recruitment and acquisitions budgets. It has become more difficult to respond to a growing number of increasingly complex questions with diminishing resources. This situation, which we readily admit is in no way an exclusively Canadian one, could be redressed by an enhanced

pooling of resources. Already, Canadian university libraries are actively undertaking shared purchasing; the libraries of the federal government are doing the same, by identifying collection themes and calling upon the libraries of other departments to answer some of the questions they receive from their clients. We have also been able to implement the *Canadian National Site Licensing Project*[3] in Canada. All these are by way of examples of the pooling of the resources of Canadian libraries.

As we mentioned earlier, these reductions are also felt in fields such as the delivery of reference services. The lack of resources, financial or other, is forcing libraries to consider innovative solutions. VRC is one solution available to libraries.

- Dissemination and promotion of Canadian knowledge

Canada is an information society which creates high quality content. Certain obstacles, sometimes legal, sometimes economic, often geographic, impede the dissemination of this information. There are special collections located in libraries and other information centres which are only known to very few researchers. The participation of these institutions in VRC will promote their collections, thereby facilitating an increased dissemination of knowledge. How many small public libraries have valuable collections on the history of their area, the result of the labours of amateur historians, who cherished the historical development of their area of the country? How many documentation centres are there, possessing information on topics like literacy, AIDS, sustainable development and amateur sports, of which the population has only a limited knowledge? How many genealogical association libraries are only known by the genealogists who visit them? The list could go on for a long time.

VRC wants to attract these potential members. It wants to give these collections the publicity they deserve. By ensuring that the institution responding to a question receives the appropriate credit, it wants to promote the existence of these collections which are of incalculable national value.

4- VRC: A Canadian service in a multicultural environment

While recognizing the importance of the Aboriginal communities, Canada is a country built on the foundations of immigration. Apart from the two historical cultural groups (French and British stock), there are many representatives of other cultural communities. During the twentieth century, the West was settled by immigrants from the countries of Eastern Europe and Scandinavia; British Columbia, on the shores of the Pacific Ocean was heavily settled by immigrants from Asia, particularly China; the Atlantic provinces are populated, among others, by people of Acadian and British ancestry; Ontario and Québec, as the most highly industrialized provinces, have attracted immigrants from the four corners of the earth.

This demographic development has enriched and diversified the Canadian reality. The Canadian social fabric is one of an intriguing and fortunate complexity. Even though many families of immigrant parents are now in their second, third or fourth generation, one just as often meets those newly arrived in the country.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

As is the case in most countries, the majority of these new Canadians are located in major urban centres. Libraries, such as the Toronto Public Library, the Vancouver Public Library and the Bibliothèque de Montréal serve client groups representing a multitude of cultural communities. In becoming associated with these libraries, VRC is required to provide relevant services, which take into account the specific characteristics and expectations of the various client groups.

There is much to be learned through collaboration with institutions working in Canada's major cities. For example, these institutions will provide VRC with guidance on sensitive approaches to service for client groups from cultural communities. VRC will be nothing without this national collaboration and the achievement of these objectives is merely its ultimate expression.

The pooling of collections, which we discussed earlier on, is another component allowing the service to reach all the population groups in Canada. For example, a person of Ukrainian descent who lives in Montréal will be able, with the assistance of VRC, to take advantage of the knowledge and skills associated with the collections of the public and university libraries of the Prairie provinces; an Aboriginal person living in Winnipeg will be able to draw on the collection of the resource centre of the Assembly of First Nations in Ottawa; and a person of Acadian descent will be able to use the resources of the *Centre d'études acadiennes* of the *Université de Moncton*.

Canadian libraries are aware of the work that remains to be done in order to achieve adequate service for the cultural communities. We hope that VRC is a step in the right direction, that it will allow libraries to provide services that are better adapted and that it is going to facilitate closer ties between all Canadians and their libraries.

5- What is the role of the National Library of Canada?

As the initiator of VRC, the National Library of Canada is playing a key role in its development. A team consisting of reference librarians, a systems librarian and programmers from the National Library of Canada worked to develop the VRC software and to develop the policies governing the implementation of the service.

The National Library of Canada provides the day-to-day management of VRC. This involves the review of requests for registration in VRC, the creation of member files and the maintenance of the management software for the questions and answers.

However, the NLC is not the only element of the success of VRC and, in this context, it has called upon the community of libraries and associated institutions to assume some of its management aspects and to provide guidance. One of the roles of the National Library of Canada is to support initiatives and applied research, and to contribute to the development of federal policies in areas related to library and information services in Canada. National plans and policies are developed through consultation with professional associations and colleagues working in areas such as: the information highway, resource sharing, federal government libraries, preservation and service to persons with disabilities

By facilitating communication and the exchange of services among Canadian libraries, the National Library of Canada, through VRC, is helping to bring together the community of Canadian libraries.

6- Conclusion

Canadian libraries are increasingly focusing on the establishment of networks and agreements so as to always better serve their clients. This is the environment in which Virtual Reference Canada has been established. But, we have to realize that in order to provide a service which brings information to all Canadians, a number of factors need to be considered. In this paper, we have mentioned several: linguistic duality, cultural diversity and the federal, provincial and territorial legal framework.

It is highly encouraging to find that the library world is not afraid to invest in itself and to transform the ways in which it operates. The work and research conducted in the virtual reference field, as well as the conferences which focus on this theme, amply demonstrate the dynamism that exists in our ranks. However, all the stakeholders working in this field are well aware that we are only just beginning and that the real work is still ahead of us. Technological changes will allow us to further transform the way we deliver our services. This being said, we should never forget that technology is only one of the means open to us in serving our clients. It is not an end in itself.

---

[1]. "Ask A Question" – Grant MacEwan College. – [Ref. dated March 1, 2002]. – Access: http://www.lrc.gmcc.ab.ca/research/ask

[2]. "Saskatchewan Libraries : Ask Us!" – Saskatchewan Libraries. – [Ref. dated March 1, 2002]. – Access : http://www.lib.sk.ca/askus

[3]. "Canadian National Site Licensing Project." – University of Ottawa. – [Ref. dated March 1, 2002]. – Access: http://www.uottawa.ca/library/cnslp

National Library of Canada | Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

VIRTUAL REFERENCE CANADA

--

RÉFÉRENCE VIRTUELLE CANADA

Ms. Franceen Gaudet

M. Nicolas Savard

National Library of Canada

Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

Canada

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

National Library of Canada Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

VIRTUAL REFERENCE CANADA

- Introduction
- VRC : What is it ?
  - An automated process
  - Focus on collaboration
  - Importance of networks

Canada

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

National Library of Canada | Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

VIRTUAL REFERENCE CANADA

- VRC : A Canadian service
  - Bilingual interface and multilingual service
  - Importance of copyright
  - Confidentiality issues
  - Participating institutions
  - Forging links between Canadian collections
  - Dissemination and promotion of Canadian knowledge

Canada

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

National Library of Canada Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

VIRTUAL REFERENCE CANADA

- VRC : A Canadian service in a multicultural environment
- What is the role of the National Library of Canada ?
- Conclusion

Canada

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

National Library of Canada Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

VIRTUAL REFERENCE CANADA

Virtual Reference Canada

c/o National Library of Canada
395 Wellington
Room 229
Ottawa, ON
K1A 0N4
CANADA

Email : vrc-rvc@nlc-bnc.ca

Web Site : http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/vrc-rvc

Canada

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

[X] This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

[ ] This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

[X] This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

[ ] This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").

LIR 05-8-595
LAUTH?

National Library of Canada | Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

Contacts

- Franceen Gaudet — Senior Project Officer
  franceen.gaudet@nlc-bnc.ca
  (613) 992-8429
- Donna Dinberg — Systems Librarian/Analyst
  donna.dinberg@nlc-bnc.ca
  (613) 995-9227
- Nicolas Savard — Reference Librarian
  nicolas.savard@nlc-bnc.ca
  (613) 992-6942

www.loc.gov/cdrs

Canada